



FLOWERS FALL

Field Notes from a Buddhist Mom's Experimental Life

BY BETHANY SALTMAN

A DETACHED LOOK AT ATTACHMENT PARENTING

YET, THOUGH IT IS LIKE THIS, SIMPLY, FLOWERS FALL AMID OUR LONGING,
AND WEEDS SPRING UP AMID OUR ANTIPATHY.

— Dogen Zenji, *Genjokoan*

The other day I was with a bunch of moms I didn't know very well and one mentioned to her friend that she was decidedly *not* into "attachment parenting." She shot a look at me, assuming, it appeared, that I decidedly *am* into it, and that I might have some big reaction. While I appreciate her desire to define herself in relation to this übercrunchy parenting style, since I've learned more about the history of attachment research, I wonder if she is more into it than she thinks.

Most of us take for granted the notion that babies need love to thrive—not just food and shelter, but touch and a bond with a particular person, usually a mom. However, this belief has actually been hard-won in the last 50 or so years. In the late 19th and early 20th century, Freud theorized that human beings are made up of intrapsychic drives, meaning we are born with our needs, urges, and conflicts lodged within our own unconscious minds. This is a massive simplification, but it seems that for Freud, other people were more like objects in our instinctual race to be gratified than related figures. So a mom could screw her kid up for life (not much has changed in that regard) through hasty toilet training, et cetera, but anyone could be a stand-in for Mother, because basically the kid just needed to get his or her needs met. Or not.

In the 1950s psychoanalysts began to question this model, noting that when children were removed from their mothers through hospitalization, they suffered terribly. They were fed, warm, kind of comforted, and somewhat stimulated, so what could be the problem? In Robert Karen's excellent book, *Becoming Attached* (Oxford University Press, 1998), he traces the development in psychology toward realizing that mother and child are, in fact, biologically *attached*, and how disrupting that attachment impairs a child's development. Big time. Children, contrary to the behaviorist thinking of the time, love their mothers for reasons other than the conditioned response of affection for the food source, the big boob. John Bowlby, a psychoanalyst and pioneer in attachment theory, was inspired by research about how goslings were instinctively imprinted to the first moving object they saw upon hatching—their mamas—even though the babies could feed themselves. And then there's the famous experiment where the baby monkeys clung to the terrycloth-covered wire monkey even though the plain, unadorned wire monkey dispensed the food. The little primates chose snuggles over chow.

These findings were controversial. The idea of children instinctively attaching to their mothers seemed silly to many of the so-called experts. Then along came Mary Ainsworth, who had been meticulously studying mothers and their babies around the world and noted that a mother's relational, "attachment style" shaped a child's sense of security and capacity to self-soothe. And Ainsworth found that the more responsive the mother, the more secure the baby. Responsiveness did not lead to wussiness, as many thought at the time, but to independence.

Enter Dr. William Sears, a contemporary pediatrician, patriarch of a large Christian family, and a best-selling author who coined the term attachment parenting. Sears, who undoubtedly is well schooled in attachment research, has presented a coherent set of principles and practices for parents to live by in order to foster the healthy attachments Mary Ainsworth, for instance, studied. The funny thing is that Ainsworth did much of her primary work in Uganda, observing mothers and their babies there. So when Dr. Sears encourages families to co-sleep (sleep with their child or children in their bed), "wear" their child in a sling, and nurse on demand, is he inadvertently suggesting that we parent like Ugandans? Just a thought.

In any case, when Azalea was born, I loved wearing Azzie in a sling. I nursed constantly. But we also engaged in sleep training, meaning we allowed her to cry herself to sleep, which was horrific, but resulted (in two nights) in a baby who slept through the night and was totally psyched to get up in the morning. "Crying it out" (along with formula feeding, vaccinations, and a list of other taboos) is not even allowed to be *mentioned* on a popular attachment parenting online discussion board.

Most parents I know adopt combinations of styles. And even someone who refuses the label of Sears-style attachment parent most likely functions as an Ainsworth-style one, or at least tries to. I doubt the woman I met questions whether or not she should respond sensitively to her infant. Even Bowlby says, "There were very loving mothers who had bottle-fed their babies and some very rejecting mothers who had breastfed their babies. And it seemed to me that the feeding variable was totally irrelevant." But we can all get self-righteous about whatever way we think is best. I get it. There is a lot at stake. This is where detachment, a term we hear a lot in Buddhism, comes in handy—as we judge other parents, judge ourselves, and try to turn something as subtle and profound as attachment into a technique. Also known as nonattachment, detachment is the practice of maintaining enough awareness to actually see through our assumptions, breaking down our belief in our beliefs. We may never stop (I'm told) thinking our crazy, angry, or judging thoughts, but through the practice of detachment, we invest less in those thoughts and can pause before acting on them. Eventually the thoughts dissolve. As parents, this is useful. I guess you could call it "detachment parenting."

For instance, if Azalea has a tantrum as we leave the library, the thought crosses my mind that everyone there probably thinks I suck. That thought makes my body tense up. I experience the tension as impatience. I attempt to rush Azalea out even faster. She lays flat on the floor and freaks out. I notice the urge to yank her up off the floor like a wire monkey and remove her immediately. Because I have a hairsbreadth of awareness in that moment, I save myself and her.

I am detached enough to remain attached.

This time. ●